

Panthers in danger of becoming 'best-documented extinction ever'

State's big cats may already be beyond saving

By Craig Pittman, / *St. Petersburg Times*

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On a quiet spring morning two years ago, a sheriff's deputy cruised along a dark suburban street near Fort Myers. The deputy heard a thump, slammed on the brakes. Too late. A tawny body lay cooling by the roadside.

The deputy had hit a 2-year-old, 85-pound, male Florida panther. When a veterinarian dissected the cat, he found signs that the endangered Florida panther is in deeper trouble than ever before.

Genetic defects

In his May 2008 report, Dr. Mark Cunningham listed three genetic defects: a badly kinked tail, an undescended testicle and, most troubling, a quarter-inch hole in the big cat's heart.

Such defects were supposed to be gone from the panther population, vanquished by a bold experiment 15 years ago that involved crossbreeding with Texas cougars.

But now they have resurfaced. And because of a series of decisions made by federal officials, panther experts say fixing the problem this time will be nearly impossible. In short, the Florida panther is a dead cat walking.

"It's going to be the best-documented extinction ever, unless they do something," said Laurie Wilkins of the Florida Museum of Natural History.



Will Vragovic / *St. Petersburg Times*

Don Juan, a Florida panther, sits in a cage while being relocated from Busch Gardens to Homosassa Springs State Wildlife Park.

Over the past 15 years, the federal agency in charge of protecting the habitat where panthers roam, hunt and mate has given developers, miners and farmers permission to destroy more than 40,000 acres of it.

The panther is Florida's state animal. It's a license-plate icon, the namesake of Miami's pro hockey team and the mascot of schools around the state. Yet it hasn't received the protection promised by the Endangered Species Act. Here's why:

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which spends more than \$1.2 million a year on panther protection, has not blocked a single development that altered panther habitat. Former agency employees say every time they tried, "we were told that, politically, it would be a disaster," said Linda Ferrell, who retired from the agency in 2005.
- To bolster the case for allowing development, agency officials have used flawed science. They even manipulated figures to make it appear at one point as if there were surplus panthers.
- Agency officials say they've required developers and others to make up for destroying the habitat. But their own figures show those efforts have fallen short, and now they concede there's not enough habitat left to let the population leave the endangered list.

'A red flag'

Meanwhile, the panthers are once again producing cats with genetic defects, like the one the deputy hit. In the past seven years, nine have turned up with holes in their hearts.

Cunningham, the veterinarian, calls it "a red flag" that panthers are headed for genetic problems again. There are other signs of trouble, too: changes in their behavior that have proved deadly for suburban cats and dogs.

But because so much of the panthers' habitat has been paved over, officials cannot bring in more Texas cougars, as in 1995.

"Where would we put them? The population is saturated," said Deborah Jansen, who has been studying panthers for 20 years.

The irony isn't lost on those who engineered the panther's original genetic rescue, like Craig Johnson, once the top federal wildlife official in South Florida.

"Numerically, they're doing better," Johnson said. "Ecologically, they're screwed."

The panther used to roam the Southeast by the thousands. But for 40 years the elusive animal has been hemmed into Florida's southernmost tip, in one of the state's fastest-growing regions.



New York Times News Service

About the Florida panther

- The Florida panther was declared the state animal in 1982, chosen over the manatee and the alligator.
- They were on the original endangered species list, issued in 1967.
- When the Endangered Species Act passed in 1973, there were only 20 to 30 panthers left. Some state officials even believed they were extinct.
- The World Wildlife Fund hired a Texas puma hunter to travel to Florida in 1972 and find out if there were any panthers left. He found signs of panthers, and in 1973 captured one near Lake Okeechobee, a gaunt, tick-infested 9-year-old female.
- The average lifespan of a Florida panther in the wild is 12 years.
- Males average 130 pounds and measure 6 to 8 feet with the tail, while females average 80 pounds and measure 5 to 7 feet including the tail.
- Since 1990, much of the state's research into the Florida panther has been financed by sales of the Florida panther specialty license plate. The plate brought in more than \$1.3 million in 2008, the year with the most recent figures.

"The panther is arguably the greatest species conservation challenge in the country," said Paul Souza, who now supervises the South Florida office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In the early 1990s, of the 30 panthers remaining, only six females were producing kittens. Because of inbreeding, many carried potentially fatal birth defects.

"It was like they had hit a biological brick wall," said Melody Roelke, the veterinarian who discovered the genetic problems.

There was talk of captive breeding. Instead the state tried a \$20,000 gamble. In 1995, biologists turned loose eight female Texas cougars to breed with the panthers. They replenished the gene pool and boosted the population to about 100. The boom highlighted a bigger problem.

Habitat shrinking

For three decades, biologists have known that maintaining enough habitat for these wide-ranging predators is the key to saving the species. Females need 29,000 acres, males 62,000 acres.

Yet as the population grew, federal officials granted permits that converted panther habitat into a new university, new roads and subdivisions including one ironically called the Habitat.

Since the Texas cougar experiment began, the wildlife service has said yes to 113 projects that if built would wipe out more than 42,000 acres of panther habitat.

Each time developers propose altering habitat, biologists with the wildlife service review the impact on the species. They look at whether it will jeopardize the panthers' existence.

The last time the agency offered what's known as a "jeopardy opinion" on a project in panther habitat was 1993, when it objected to Lee County's plans for widening Corkscrew Road.

But then the agency offered county officials a way around its objections. As a result, the road was widened, opening up more habitat for development.

Jay Slack, who ran the agency's South Florida office from 1997 to 2005, said he didn't see anything wrong with allowing developers, miners and farmers to transform so much habitat.

After all, he pointed out, thanks to the Texas cougars, "the number of panthers has been steadily on the rise. It just didn't add up to a risk of extinction."

All in all, Slack said, "I feel like we did a good job."

- Panthers are nocturnal animals. They sleep during the day and hunt, travel and mate at night.
 - Scientists first began capturing panthers and attaching radio collars to them in 1981. Using signals from the radio collars they can study their movements. However, scientists do not have collars on all panthers. Currently, 28 have them.
 - Their preferred diet consists of deer, wild hogs and some smaller animals, such as raccoons and armadillos. Panthers stalk their prey, moving in quietly. Although they do not chase down the deer and wild hogs they eat, they can spring as far as 15 feet for the kill.
 - Panther kittens are reared by their mother in a den. The average litter size is two kittens. Young cats' fur is spotted, and they have five rings on their tails. As they get older their eyes darken, and their fur and tail become more of a uniform tawny shade. There are no Florida panthers that are black.
- Sources: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Friends of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge

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